

STATEMENT BY MR. J. MERLE DAVIS

Director, Department of Social and Industrial
Research and Counsel of the
International Missionary Council

I have seen the Victoria Falls of the Zambezi. Even since reading Livingstone's life, when a boy, I have hoped to see the great Falls which he discovered and to get acquainted with this country which is inseparably connected with his work.

The Falls far surpass my expectations. They are indescribably beautiful and impressive. The accumulated water of the vast Zambezi basin, nearly as large as that of the Mississippi, flowing quietly in a stream a mile and a quarter wide, suddenly plunging into a fissure four hundred feet deep and less in width that opens in the plain at right angles, with the course of the river. This vast volume of water bursts through the wall of this fissure by a channel only 100 feet wide and hammers its way with great speed and power through a series of fissures almost parallel with the first, connected with each other by the powerful action of the river. Twenty miles further on, after passing these series of chasms, the river emerges into a wide open bed and resumes its normal flow.

I have been reminded all day of the striking parallel between the tremendous experience of the waters of the Zambezi and the present shattering experience of the African race. After milleniums of comparatively quiet and unrestricted, undirected life, the Bantu race has taken a tremendous plunge and is pouring into a restricted channel hemmed in by forces it has not known before and which it cannot cope with. It has to surge forward between these walls at a speed it has never experienced and whither it knows not; let us hope that as with the Zambezi, there lies before it a normal river bed into which it can expand and find its way in due course to the sea. But the component elements of the people's life are being shattered irrevocably apart, and will, as the particles of water, have to find new forms and alignments in the life that is ahead. Excuse this rather fanciful simile. The tremendous surroundings and dramatic setting of this place have moved me deeply. The Falls make a combined attack upon four senses at once, eye, ear, sensory nerves of feeling, and of smell, and the result is over-powering. The earth trembles a mile away with the continuous hammering of the mile wide battery of cascades, while the might orchestra with its trebles and undertone bass parts plays ceaselessly.

I have just had a remarkably satisfactory three days with the officials of the Northern Rhodesia Government in Livingstone, and from Governor General to the last department officer, I have been met with the greatest of cordiality and have received every possible offer of assistance. These officials and those of Southern Rhodesia frankly show their surprise and gratification that the International Missionary Council is approaching the work of the missions from the social and industrial side. They believe we have a major work to do in helping missions here to live up to the full implications and opportunities of their work.

I have been profoundly impressed from the day I landed in South Africa with the tremendous responsibilities and opportunities of Christian missions in Southern Africa. I have experienced nothing to compare with it in any other part of the world. While in some parts of Asia missions have been wondering just what their job might be, in Africa they have had placed in their hands the greater part of the task of recreating the life of the race, of rebuilding the Black Man's world and adjusting him to his new surroundings. It is a staggering task, literally dumped upon missions by the governments concerned.

The leaders of these Rhodesia governments are working in the closest of harmony with missions, (for the most part), and frankly say that were it not for the missionary program of educational, industrial, and religious work, they would find themselves in an untenable position. Both at Livingstone, and at Salisbury, I was told by the highest executive that they desired to see the existing missions strengthened, personnel increased, activities widened. I am not blind to the fact that it is partly due to self-interest that these governments take this attitude, but it is also due to a genuine sense of high responsibility for the welfare and development of the native and these officials know that missions can lift the native farther and faster and safer than any other agency.

The only other parallel to this situation of modern missions in Southern Africa that I am acquainted with, is the role played by the Benedictine and Cistercian and Augustinian Monks and minasteries in the early middle ages, or rather in the Dark ages, when they literally recreated the life of central Europe and laid the foundations of a new social and religious life and civilization. The analogies with this position of missions in Africa, while not complete, are most striking and suggestive. Now our small Department comes along out here and finds a situation ripe for action. A large majority of the missionaries I have met tell me that the adjustment of the natives, socially and industrially, is the greatest problem the Church (Native) is facing. In the Union the missionaries and friends of the native are a discouraged group. The political and race prejudice odds are too heavy for them. The storm of repression, injustice, and race hatred has evidently got to get worse before conditions can improve. But in Rhodesia the situation is fundamentally different, and up here is where a program of justice and opportunity and enlightenment can be carried out, with some hope of its eventually bearing fruit in the Union.